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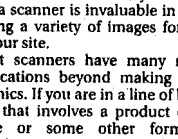
Scan your database, copy options

One of the most useful but often underrated technology tools for a home office is a scanner. Scanners take images or text from a printed page and convert it into a computer file. You can then work on these files using your personal computer.



E-BIZ

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Scanners are very popular with users of the Internet. No wonder — if you have a Web site, you'll find that a scanner is invaluable in converting a variety of images for use on your site.

But scanners have many more applications beyond making Web graphics. If you are in a line of business that involves a product catalogue or some other form of graphic representation, you may want to move this information into a computer database. Use a scanner to capture each image, and then try a program such as ThumbsPlus (**www.cerious.com**) to build a simple database of your images.

You can create more sophisticated databases using programs such as Polaroid DisplayCase (**www.polaroid.com/products/displaycase/index.html**). The software allows you to link each photo to a variety of other information. A real estate agent, for example, may use it to build a database of properties for sale.

Scanners are also extremely useful for those who need to transfer a large amount of printed text or other material to a computer. In the past few years, optical character recognition technology used in scanning devices has matured to the point where it is now very easy to transfer text on a paper document to a PC.

I've been using Adobe Acrobat Capture (**www.adobe.com**) to convert several hundred pages of text. The program does a fabulous job of scanning each page and creating a document that can be imported into a database. That alone has made the scanner investment worthwhile. There are some frustrations with the technology — generated documents are not always 100-per-cent accurate — but it beats retyping the information.

Finally, once you get a scanner, you may also end up with a makeshift photocopier. For example, my Hewlett Packard ScanJet came with copy software. Just insert a document into the scanner, press the copy button in this software, and a copy comes out of the printer. The quality is adequate for small needs, but you will still go to the local copy store with larger-scale jobs.

One thing to keep in mind when purchasing a scanner is that investing in a higher-quality product can be worth it. The scanner market has changed dramatically in the past several years, with a wide variety of inexpensive models becoming available for under $100. While these devices definitely work for basic scanning and copying, you may find that some will not do so well with an optical character recognition program.

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